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ABSTRACT

In March 1997 Marshal Applewhite and his band of 40 "web site building multidimensional New Agers" committed ritual suicide to pass through where physical bodies cannot go. A folklorist who belongs to an Internet current events newsgroup had been reading Applewhite's posted comments since 1995. On his web page, Applewhite noted how "it is nearly impossible to take advanced, non-human concepts and force them into comprehensible human language." When the group posted, they faced much social recalcitrance. Successful communication on the Internet demands that the communicators be ready and willing to engage in debate. In almost all Heaven's Gate newsgroup posts examined, this Internet norm is completely disregarded. Although the news media focused on Applewhite's use of the Internet to recruit new members, the group made little effort to persuade non-believers, and their most ambitious goal was probably the location of individuals already spiritually prepared for a Heaven's Gate conversion experience. The folklorist, who had been studying Internet millennial communication for almost three years, attempted to approach Heaven's Gate's campaign with an open and educated mind and to follow their arguments. All of their many 1996 postings presented similar evolutionary claims and employed similar rhetorical strategies. Studying the rhetoric of their postings reveals they were looking for individuals already in a spiritual and emotional state that made them ready for an emotive conversion experience. As insane as the beliefs of the Heaven's Gate individuals were, they knew exactly what they intended to do and, by their own standards of judgment as well as by rhetorical analysis, they did just exactly what they wanted to do. (NKA)

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Jimmying Heaven's Gate: A Folk Rhetorical Approach to Internet Communication

In the February twenty-first 1998 edition of the *San Diego Union*, a back-page headline reads: "Ex-Heaven's Gate follower kills self on 2nd Try"(Thornton, 1998). This is how I first got the news: in a clipping my mother sent me from San Diego. That was just a few weeks ago.

I had exchanged quite a bit of e-mail with Ric—the man who killed himself. He was the last follower of Marshal Applewhite at the time of the 1997 suicides—the forty-first to enter Heaven's Gate. Applewhite and his small band of web site building multi-dimensional New Agers committed ritual suicide in order to pass through where physical bodies cannot go. In so doing, they joined their spiritual superiors in the next stage of being.

This is what Ric believed the result of his suicide would be. But for all I had I talked to him, he sounded like a more or less reasonable guy. Still, he chose to take his own life. Its this sense of total-self-negation-made-reasonable that goes to the heart of why the Heaven's Gate group's motives and choices still haunt me.

To get to the topic of my paper today, however, we have to step back in time a bit and imagine its the twenty-sixth of September, 1995. You are looking at an Internet news-group you often check to keep up with current events—"alt.current-events.usa,"

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A news-group is an electronic bulletin board that individuals can access on the Internet. There are thousands of newsgroups, and each focuses on a single topic. Through e-mail, anyone can post pretty much whatever they want in these public forums. What you see here is a representation of the "alt.current-events.usa" newsgroup. Each of these titles represents a post or related series of posts that someone put up here. In a few days they would have disappeared from the list as new posts kept coming in—but if it were September 1995, you could look at this one, just below the 45 over here, and see, "UNDERCOVER JESUS REVEALED." If you did see this, you might have clicked on it, chosen to read it, just because it is such a strange sounding title—already, maybe, smirking at its incongruity.

What attitude might you take toward this odd statement? Might it be a little derisive?

Even folklorists, such as I, might have smiled as this man did. We might have thought, "Ahh, another nut-case on the Internet—how common they are becoming!" If we did, we would hardly have been alone.

The man who I presume wrote, or at least approved, the "UNDERCOVER JESUS" post saw our responses to it as indicative of a failure of language. On his now infamous web site, he noted how "it is nearly impossible to take advanced, non-human concepts and force them into comprehensible human language." After two tentative newsgroup posts and the creation of a web page, Do came to realize, "after posting them for only a few days" that "we [should] take these statements off the Internet. It was clear to us that their being introduced to the public at that time was premature"(Do, 1996). When Do and his group posted, they faced, not surprisingly, a large amount of social recalcitrance.

In newsgroup communication, a post, if successful, provokes response posts, and then responses to response posts, and so on. Normal Internet discourse on public newsgroups is differentiated from many other mediums by its extremely debate-centered communicative norms. As I have argued elsewhere, the Internet, and its purely verbal forums in particular, would not exist if people did not want to communicate. It is nothing more than communicative exchanges surrounding specific topics. It has its own norms and its own social pressures. One of these most obvious pressures is that of open and engaged responses. Successful communication on the Internet demands that the communicators be ready and willing to engage each other in debate. In almost all Heaven's Gate newsgroup posts I have been able to find, this Internet norm is completely disregarded.

The main-stream media, while grappling with the tragedy, seemed hard pressed not to snicker and dismiss. On Easter Sunday in 1997, ABC hastily organized a news program to air the outpouring of horror associated with the discovery of 39 rotting corpses. In particular, they were deeply concerned with the role the Internet played in this cyber-conscious religious group. A middle-aged woman chairing a panel of business-suited media experts stated: "Coming up next: ABC's technology correspondent Gina Smith will show how cults use the Internet to recruit members. And what, if any, regulations there should be."

Did these individuals really want to "recruit" new members through mass posting to news-groups? If so, to what degree is it really possible for such groups to create suicidal mass movements? Simply enough, I have come to the conclusion that the answers these questions are: no and little. Today, however, I will only be able to really focus on what the motive of the Heaven's Gate group posters was. Based on their rhetorical moves, it was not mass recruitment. Although at least one of them was

capable of the reasonable persuasive rhetoric necessary to successful Internet discourse, it was only employed once. **Because they make no attempt to persuade non-believers, their most ambitious goal must have been the location of individuals already spiritually prepared for a Heaven's Gate conversion experience.**

In a slight move away from considering rhetoric from normative examples, I want us to think about, for just a little while, the Heaven's Gate extreme. In order to do this, however, I want to emphasize this attitude I have taken toward the Heaven's Gate suicides. It is that of a folklorist and ethnographer. I call it: a "not-so-horribly-biased" attitude.

I do not deny the subjectivity of all my observations, but I have attempted to approach the Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign with an open and educated mind. I have attempted to follow their arguments from my own position. I have tried to imagine their influence over various possible audiences. In this way, I hope that my honesty and integrity in this endeavor will be apparent.

In so far as I have approached their communication in this manner, I think I can safely say that they did not employ language well informed by Aristotle, Cicero, or modern teachers of rhetoric. In so saying, I think that, by and large, those of us used to dealing with arguments in those terms just don't have access to the sort of thinking it takes to be persuaded by the Heaven's Gate group. We are left, at best, loitering around that grand Gate to the Next Evolutionary Level—scratching our heads. However, for those willing to look, I have bent and woven the trusty old coat-hangers of ethnographic method and descriptive rhetoric into a bit of jimmy—a tool to help us pry open that Gate to get a sense of a world view that is, to my mind, verging on the incomprehensible.

When the Heaven's Gate story broke into the mass media, I had been investigating Internet millennial communication for almost three years. I heard the news and didn't really have any choice but to immediately try to gather and engage as much of the Heaven's Gate data as I could. Like a good folklorist, I have collected and archived some 11.3 megabytes of their data onto my hard-drives. Today, however, I am only engaging the pre-suicide "recruitment" posts that were produced by the Heaven's Gate group almost a year after the first abortive 1995 Internet communications.

This second flurry of Internet activity was comprised of the much publicized World-Wide-Web site as well as mass newsgroup posting. A variety of Heaven's Gate associated e-mail addresses sent a series of posts to over 80 different newsgroups during 1996. The vast majority of the posts were duplicates of the same message. They were, in computer lingo, "spam"—the electronic equivalent of junk mail.

This 1996 series began on June sixth. One short e-mail was posted to the most newsgroups and on a number of occasions.

The last line was a click-able link directly to the elaborate web-site that laid out their beliefs in detail. Though this post was the most widely distributed and was even re-posted on several dates following June 6, there was almost no response to it in the newsgroups. I have located only three. One responded curtly: "that's nice dear, now go sit back down and count your breaths"(Khadro 1996).

In August of 1996, another more aggressive series of posts began to come from a Heaven's Gate domain name. There were at least six distinct varieties. Each presents similar claims. All of them were mass posted to a wide variety of Internet news groups. All of them employed very similar rhetorical strategies. One of these

messages, a mass-posting of 866 words, appealed to those who desire to enter the "Evolutionary Level Above Human."

The post begins: "I came to Earth some 2000 years ago from another physical, biological, Evolutionary Level as the expected 'Messiah,' or Jesus, and for this current mission, RETURNED to this level, this planet and entered into a human body some 24 years ago, Earth-time."

Within the various discourse communities that this post appealed to, none were likely to easily accept an assertion based upon the ethos of an e-mailing Jesus. I, as a not-so-biased observer, also immediately reject this sort of claim. This argument, as do most of their arguments, fails on a grand scale. What then is going on with these people? They must just be stupid or insane! Of course, stupid people cannot build such complex and beautiful web-sites. Maybe they are insane—but then, inquiring with a sympathetic desire into in just **what way** they are insane, I came to realize that at least one of their group was fully capable of engaging in argumentation that was rational and potentially effective. For me, anyway, that person would have to, in fact, not be insane.

This evidence came on December 12, 1996 in the form of a different sort of newsgroup post. It met with a much more engaged and considerate audience. From the rhetorical moves employed, it is clear why this happened. It **tries** to persuade. Its rhetoric posits that its audience is reasonable and can be persuaded. In so doing, it meets with a rush of negative, but, again, **engaged**, response.

The post begins: "Here's a round of applause to the Church of Scientology for their courageous action against the Cult Awareness Network." It must have been clear to the poster that the idea that the Church of Scientology was a good thing would meet with a lot of resistance on the alt.religion.scientology newsgroup. This newsgroup is

generally devoted to berating the Church—though some supporters also participate. The claim that the Church of Scientology did something good would immediately be at issue. Still, the idea that underlies it would not be: **that acting in a courageous fashion is a good thing**.

The next line of the post specifically admits alternate perspectives: "from our point of view . . . " The post is, apparently, a response to a indictment of the Heaven's Gate group by, what was at the time, the notoriously anti-New Age and pro-Christian organization known as CAN. The Heaven's Gate post claimed that CAN "condemned the innocent." When it "accused our group of 'cult activities' promoting all sorts of lies about us. When we asked to speak to them to correct some of their false accusations, they refused to listen." The post concludes: "we hope you will all continue to advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all."

In this post, the initial idea is that it is good to be courageous. CAN is accused lying. Then it is accused of "refusing to listen." CAN is portrayed as decidedly unethical. This lack of ethics is contrasted with the idea that each party should have the opportunity to present its case in order to judge the truth of its claim. Then, this open-forum attitude is linked to a commonly held belief in the value of free speech and thought. The post encourages and allies itself with those who "advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all"(Iah 1996).

The response to this post was much smaller. It was only posted to one newsgroup and was directed at the audience specific to this newsgroup in a persuasive manner. Two of its five responses unquestionably engaged the post critically.

One of these engaging responders takes up the claim that "cults" encourage free thinking. This response attacks the means that he or she assumes such groups use: "is it that whatever organization you claim to represent . . . considers that the means

justify the end, no matter what those means may be?" It goes on to engage the Heaven's Gate post in a section by section criticism. The final section in that initial post describes a historical need for so-called "cult" groups. The responder replies to the assertion:

> History has also proven that many organizations that make such claims (such as the National Socialists in Germany, the Order of the Solar Temple, Jim Jones' mob, Scientology, and the Moonies, to name but a handful) are capable of causing a considerable amount of damage to both their own members, and innocent third parties.

OK—the rhetoric **is** full of angry emotions. Still, it responds to this Heaven's Gate post in a way only made possible by the rhetorical position that the initial post takes up. The Heaven's Gate post is an open invitation to debate that seeks to persuade an audience clearly conceived of as reasonable and persuadable. The responder, in turn, is clearly aware, and in fact may expect, that the Heaven's Gate poster may be reading and ready to reply. The responder says: "and, before you even think about suggesting it, no: this is not a case of self-regulation"(Steve 1996).

What is my point with all this? It is a simple one. **At least one Heaven's Gate group member had the ability to both hold beliefs that seem to us totally unreasonable and, at the same time, engage in reasonable argumentation at a fairly advanced level.** How could this be? If a person is persuadable through reasoned argument are they not also highly unlikely to respond to the ridiculously unreasonable assertions in the majority of their own posts? Even more to the point: why would they choose to use totally unreasonable arguments in their recruitment posts when they both understood and were able to use reasonable argumentation?

To answer this last question, lets look again at the post I have up on the screen. This post was part of the an August 1, 1996 series of mass mailings. It seeks to discredit "unknowing" promoters of lies including "JEWS AND CHRISTIANS." It claims: "They are in service of "the true Antichrist and his fallen followers" the "'Luciferians.'" Although the post clearly appeals to a Christian symbolic system, it is destine to fail even among the Christian Internet community—in whom it **might** find a sympathetic ear. It attacks them directly with a virulent sort of dogmatism: "The true antichrist and his fallen followers significantly strengthened their position beginning in particular with the Charismatic Evangelical movement of the 1960's."

It is easy to see how badly such a rhetorical stance might fail. For the non-Christian, prophecies about any "anti-christ" are absurd. For the millennial Christian, direct attacks on evangelic preaching would probably not be meet with much sympathy.

But what if I am a Christian who is involved in, but somewhat dissatisfied, with his or her Christianity? I **might** step off the boat. I **might** provisionally accept the argument and continue to consider it.

Some 250 words of the post are devoted to quoting the gospels of Luke and John in support of the post's assertions. Further, the reader is implored to look to the Bible in new ways: "a true seeker who really wants to know what Jesus required of His disciples in order to go with him into his Father's Kingdom would read what JESUS SAID (His sayings in the Red Letter edition) on these subjects in the gospels"(Rep 1996). For many Protestants, this statement would be entirely acceptable. The text of the Bible is, in Protestant belief, the primary avenue to truth.

Still, no such hypothetical Christians seem to have responded to this post positively. Instead, the members of the various discourse communities that did respond, did so with dismissive derision and a little fear. One reply that exemplified the

general attitude taken towards the post stated: "I'm sorry, this is the wrong mental illness group. This is alt.support.depression. You must be looking for alt.support.eschatological-delusions. Common mistake."

There were 50 similar responses that I was able to locate and possibly many more. From those examples, it is clear that there was no critical engagement of this post's rhetorical position—and could anybody really expect there to be?

The post asserts that Jesus has embodied a human and is sending the e-mailed message. It seems like the claim made by an individual with a very thin grasp of social norms—but there is evidence it is not. When they wanted to, somebody in the group did have a very good grasp of normative Internet discourse. Further, these individuals were highly versed in technical Internet usage. They built web-sites professionally. The poster or posters of most of these posts must have been quite aware that the vast majority of his or her posting would fail. Why didn't they care? That is the question that has been goading me, and hopefully you, for the last twenty minutes or so. The answer is really rather simple as far as I can say. The Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign posters didn't care because, in their view, their posts did not fail.

As I have shown, the Heaven's Gate mechanism that generated the 1996 e-mail campaign posts was capable of effectively engaging in typical Internet discourse. They were more than a little Internet savvy. Their web-pages prove that. They were news-group savvy as the CAN post proves. They were capable of presenting an argument in a reasoned and provocative fashion. **The posters could have tried to convince people to join their group but they did not.**

If persuasion what not their goal, what was? The only reasonable remaining theory for just what the Heaven's Gate e-mail campaign posters were trying to do is simple enough. They have almost said as much themselves. The aim of the e-mail

campaign was to find individuals already in a spiritual and emotional state that made them ready to negate argument—that made them ready for an **emotive conversion experience**.

This emotional state is what I, for lack of a better word, have called a "convertible" state. The posts were seeking to locate convertible people. Those convertible people are individuals who's minds, for whatever reason, are already ready to set aside normative social mechanisms and join the Heaven's Gate community. These sorts of people must have been the target audience of the posts. It might be interesting to note, however, from my scouring of the journalistic data, there were no pre-suicide conversions through the Internet. Their attempt to find people, it seems, more or less failed.

This is, in the end, the modest result that all my folk rhetorical-jimmying yields: the individuals who were ready to enter into a social situation such as the Heaven's Gate group offered did so—and, from the vast pool of those out on the Internet, there just are not many people who were up to snuff. This is, of course, just what the Heaven's Gate group members kept saying all along. I quoted Do at the outset: "the world is not ready."

Starting last August, Ric, the man I actually talked to, was still out on the Internet saying just this. He was still out trying to allow those few convertible individuals access to the information they so desperately needed. A few days before February seventeenth, he drove from San Diego into the empty Arizona desert, put up a small tent, and ran tubing into it from the exhaust pipe of his car. Near his body he left the simple note: "DO NOT REVIVE"(Thorton, 1998).

Nine months before, the last two followers of Do attempted suicide. One was succesfull. This other was "Rick-o'-de"—or just "Ric" as he asked me to call him. After

coming out of a coma as a result of the first suicide attempt, Ric created a new web site. I came across it, and e-mailed him questions about my research. We engaged in an e-mail exchange that was both lively and intriguing. He felt that he had been left behind to help explain and propagate the ideas of Do.

I asked him about the expected audience and the intentions of the e-mailed posts. He responded:

> "We offered the information and let free will take over. It was designed by our Creator that only those who had been given a special 'gift' of recognition, would be drawn towards this material. I know that sounds very sci-fi, but if you really take a good look at the record of Jesus' ministry you would see that Ti and Do brought the very same formula for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The message then was only meant for those who have ears to hear, and it is the same today"(Rkkody, 1997).

The one thing that haunts me most about my whole last twelve or so months of obsessing on the Heaven's Gate suicides is this: as unreasonable in a socially normative sense, as insane really, as the beliefs and actions of these individuals were, they **knew** exactly what they **intended** to do and, by their own of standards of judgment as well as by my best rhetorical analysis, these people **did** just exactly what they wanted to do. For me, these facts do not sit comfortably next to the reality of what it was they were doing. What they wanted to do and how they did it, I think I understand. Why they did it, still remains shrouded in a world of deeply **felt** belief—in a world, not outside of, but though and beyond the bounds of reasonable, of socially normative, contemporary Internet discourse.